

Tory brought in to help avoid eviction

# Can this man break Dale Farm travellers deadlock?



■ Richard Bennett – holding private talks over Dale Farm

THIS is the man secretly brought in to help solve Basildon's traveller crisis.

Richard Bennett, a Surrey councillor, is charged with getting hundreds of travellers off illegal Dale Farm, Crays Hill, by finding alternative homes and saving the need for an eviction, estimated to cost around £2.5million.

Hailed as a "negotiator", the Reigate and Banstead councillor chaired the Local

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Government Association Gypsy and Traveller Task Group from 2004 until it disbanded in 2007. He has already met Basildon Council leader Tony Ball, its chief executive Bala Mahendran, and traveller spokesman Richard Sheridan for private talks in Basildon.

He also held talks with Billericay MP John Baron, who wants to avoid the eviction by finding another site.

Mr Bennett's role is to mediate between the council and travellers to find a solution, which means the site is cleared without leaving people homeless.

He knows travellers' leader Richard Sheridan, and publicly claims councils are not doing enough to develop sites

and need to make provision ahead of current Government targets.

Mr Bennett said: "I can confirm I am working with the council to produce a solution to the ongoing situation at Dale Farm, but can make no further comment."

He would not say who he was working on behalf of. It is understood many councillors were unaware of his involvement in Basildon.

Council leader Tony Ball said: "It is absolutely appropriate that he would be involved, to bring a national perspective."

"He is not taking over negotiations, and the council continues to negotiate with traveller families directly."

"There is no cost to the council."

**I am working with the council to produce a solution to the ongoing situation at Dale Farm**

## Councils 'not providing enough traveller sites'

RICHARD Bennett has a high-profile track record in tackling the thorny issue of traveller sites.

The ConservaTory councillor for Reigate and Banstead this month he told a Local Government Information Unit seminar councils were not providing enough traveller sites and should not wait for deadlines to expire on Government demands.

Basildon has 109 legal traveller pitches and 80-plus unauthorised ones, but has been ordered to provide 66 more by 2011. By contrast, Mr Banstead's own council has just 12 legal pitches, seven unauthorised ones and has to find land for nine more pitches by 2016.

David McPherson Davis, a member of Ramsden Crays Parish Council, said: "There appears to be no transparency over his role and who he represents. Why does a councillor from Surrey appear to have a lead role in Basildon's provision?"

## Campaigners hopeful of new pitch progress

TRAVELLERS have welcomed the news that an outside expert has been brought in to try to break the Dale Farm deadlock.

Campaigner Grattan Puxon said: "It is positive Mr Bennett is now involved."

"He has been at the forefront of plans to get councils to make more site provision as soon as possible."

This is sharp contrast to Mr Puxon's previous view of Basildon Council attempts at conciliation. Earlier, he had branded talks pointless, saying only one traveller – Richard Sheridan – had bothered going to a previous meeting.

In another press release, Mr Puxon had said families would "ignore threats" from the council and a stand will be made at Dale Farm. He wrote: "Richard Sheridan believes, despite the odds, they can win their long fight and save their community."

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